

LEADING  
COLLABORATION  
TO SOLVE GLOBAL  
CHALLENGES

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## Introduction

We live in a world with deepening social, economic, cultural and political fractures. These include an exponential growth in inequality, the return of absolute poverty and growing fault lines between those who have secure employment, those who work in precarious conditions, and those who are excluded. Migration caused by war and poverty has led to large scale suffering. Social solidarity within and across countries has been undermined, leading to rising xenophobia. In addition, urgent action is needed to protect our planet. We live in a global context that is divided by both real as well as symbolic walls. It is a world where democracy is under threat.

These nascent catastrophes reflect a convergence of economic, political and social factors. They also reveal profound connections across borders. These are challenges that can only be solved by global collaboration. Universities, as institutions that are both nationally anchored and globally linked, are well positioned to forge transnational synergies. The relative autonomy of many universities from the full thrust of political and economic pressures offers valuable space for innovation in response to global challenges.

However, there are many obstacles for higher education in tackling these global challenges. I will focus on two. First, there is what I have referred to elsewhere as the competition fetish in higher education (Naidoo, 2016). This is a modern day magical belief that competition is the only route to excellence and that competition is always fair and efficient. Second, we are witnessing the intensification of unhealthy forms of nationalism which verge on xenophobia and have an impact on higher education. The competition fetish and closed nationalism create walls which prevent universities from coming together to solve global problems.

I am not arguing against all forms of competition or nationalism. Scientific competition has resulted in major intellectual and social advances and regulated competition in higher education has increased access. My argument is that the indiscriminate deployment of different types of competition in all areas of higher education leads to adverse consequences. It is also important for universities to contribute to their localities, regions and countries; and

the contribution of universities to global wellbeing does not need to detract from national responsibilities. The two activities should be conducted in a co-ordinated way to lever mutual benefit and achieve balance to enhance national and global wellbeing. However, this raises difficult tensions for leaders to reconcile. How do they support staff to think globally, but act locally and regionally? Have we the right infrastructure and professional services that understand and can work across complex cultural and global differences? These are essential questions to answer, particularly since future prosperity and world security hinge on achieving such a balance.

Some answers may be found in inspirational examples. King's Sierra Leone Partnership is a collaboration between Kings College London and its three National Health Service Foundation Trusts; and Sierra Leone's Medicine and Allied Health Science, Ministry of Health and Sanitation, and Connaught Hospital (King's College London, 2013). The swift and effective response of the Partnership to the frightening epidemic of Ebola that threatened to destroy a generation in Sierra Leone showcases how health and academic systems can work together across national borders to contain deadly diseases and build healthcare capacity, capability and sustainability in a global context.

Despite such trailblazer initiatives, however, many universities face barriers to global collaboration and I will outline these in this paper.

## Higher education and geopolitical rivalry

First, higher education has been positioned at the centre of geopolitical rivalry. It is seen as an engine to enhance a country's competitive edge in the global economy. Amidst rising geopolitical tensions, universities are now more directly deployed in a race for influence through which powerful groups in influential nations assert their own preferred political, economic and cultural models (Naidoo, 2011). In Iowa in the USA for example, a Bill proposed by a Republican Senator has the potential to undermine academic freedom by proposing that public universities consider political party

affiliation when hiring new faculty members. The Hungarian government has threatened to close the research intensive Central European University which has worked to promote civic freedoms and democracy and has offered an impressive range of scholarships for refugees. These are all attempts to contain universities which have opened doors to those who are marginalised and which call truth to those in power.

## Universities building walls for exclusion

Second, prestigious university partnerships themselves build even higher walls to exclude students from disadvantaged social groups. They apply a decontextualised form of academic merit which assumes that all students regardless of social background have the same opportunity to compete. In addition, government sponsored excellence contests like the Research Excellence Framework interact with rankings to privilege research, reward fast graduation and subsequent high earnings. This works against widening participation because disadvantaged students are perceived as taking additional time away from research and adversely affecting graduation and employment statistics. The very same competition mechanisms penalise institutions that absorb students from disadvantaged communities. There is little status or financial reward for the value that such institutions add. This is a competition that is always rigged towards the elite. At the apex of this competition, the battle for 'world-class' university status, rages on. It is a battle that is fought between the most elite universities in the most powerful countries. In highly stratified systems few benefits trickle down to enhance the system as a whole. The result is a steep and dysfunctional stratification which precludes healthy diversity and the ability of the system to respond to the variety of economic, social and cultural expectations.

Riyad Shahjahan and Clara Morgan show us that this is the same between countries (Shahjahan and Morgan, 2016). International organisations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank create false spaces of equivalence across countries with very different political and economic contexts.

Such contexts are delocalised and depoliticised so that they can be presented as legitimate comparative measures. Peripheral nations and universities thus have to mimic dominant countries even when they have no chance of winning. These developments lead to what I have termed the combined and unequal development of higher education worldwide (Naidoo, 2014). There are high-status, well-resourced universities in poor countries which are intimately connected to global power nodes. At the same time, the richest countries in the world have rising numbers of poor institutions which recruit the most disadvantaged students and which are detached from power. As Manuel Castells has stated, rather than gaining access to powerful forms of knowledge, large numbers of students across the world receive an education which stunt innovative capacities and maintain inequality (Castells, 2001).

## Instrumental education

It is also more difficult for universities to develop global curricula that engage students in critical thinking. Martha Nussbaum, the Harvard trained philosopher, has indicated that the perception of higher education as a lever for employment has created instrumental reasoning. She shows how this leads to growing numbers of young people who are unable to empathise with the suffering of others and who are not equipped to respond to the most serious threats that democracy faces (eg Nussbaum, 1997). Second, western dominance and inequality in resources leads to international partnerships eroding, rather than integrating, local knowledge. Arturo Escobar has illustrated how indigenous knowledge in Latin America has been largely erased from the intellectual field (eg Escobar and Mignolo, 2010). At the same time, in an increasingly inter-related world, a binary logic contrasting American and European culture with 'non-western' cultures, or modernity with tradition, denies the multiplicity of peoples' lives and discourages criticism of intergroup conflict. There is also the danger that equating knowledge with culture in a simplistic manner will result in us having no mechanisms to evaluate knowledge. We need to find ways to interrogate the relationship between power and knowledge in a non-reductionist way.

## Research commodification

And what about research? The fractures that face us are globally connected and comprise social, political and economic dimensions which are best addressed by multi-lateral and multi-disciplinary research teams. However, academic knowledge is being increasingly commodified and appropriated as a source of private profit. Inequalities in research power also privilege research responding to the concerns of the powerful in rich countries while the crises facing the majority of the world's population living in low income countries receives less attention. In addition, current competition frameworks militate against blue skies research and against certain subjects in the Humanities and Social Sciences, all of which are essential for long term inclusive development (eg Collini, 2012). In the UK, the evaluation of the social and economic impact of research appears to favour impact with corporate actors rather than community and social engagement (Watermeyer and Olssen, 2016).

## University leaders rising to global challenges

How do university leaders respond to these great challenges? In carrying out their leadership role, university leaders face the formidable task of mediating between a complex internal environment with powerful professional autonomy and strong disciplinary allegiances while responding to competing external demands from governments, students, their own governing bodies, business and civil society. The hyper-competitive landscape encourages a competitive mindset while the nature of the challenges faced require collaborative leadership and dialogue to develop future-responsive strategies.

University leaders also need to build new types of relationships in all parts of the world based on respect and equity. Rather than perceiving multi-polarity as a threat, we can see this as an opportunity to learn from important initiatives elsewhere. We need to revise our perceptions that the US and the UK are the only successful models of higher education and are universally applicable. This is a myth

created by focussing only on the successes of the most elite research universities in such systems. There is much to be proud of in our systems but we need to acknowledge the major problems of such highly stratified sectors. We also need to highlight innovations in other parts of the world. For example, Jose Restrepo, the president of one of the oldest and most prestigious Colombian universities, has spoken recently about how leading universities in Colombia are working together to transform their universities to consolidate democracy and end violent conflict. His own institution has set out a comprehensive programme for the next three decades which includes: curriculum change so that all undergraduates are exposed to the need for reconciliation and forgiveness, scholarships for students from the poorest and most violent regions, and research programmes to address inequality, access to public goods and political participation.

## Alternatives to competition

Leaders need to resist the complete onslaught of the competition fetish. We need to understand where competition is useful. Who gains and who loses? Are there problems that competition cannot solve? We also need to find alternatives. Here I would like to refer to the work of Elinor Ostrom, the first woman to win the Nobel Prize for Economics (Ostrom, 1990). She challenged the assumption that human beings are trapped into competitive behaviour which in the end will destroy our common natural resources. The usual example is of two communities living by a great lake who will compete to fish until the lake's fish stock is decimated. Her own extensive field research revealed that people are not the greedy, selfish actors of standard economic theory. Individuals came together to decide on quotas of fish or used fish nets with larger holes so that young fish are not caught. They developed rules and trust and sanctions. In these ways a natural resource was made available for their children's children. She revealed to the world that individuals can organise themselves to share and sustain rather than compete and deplete.

Learning from this, how do university leaders balance institutional self-interest in responding to the demands of governments and other stakeholders with the urgent need to speak with a collective voice against rampant commodification, the erosion of academic autonomy, and the devaluing of research expertise, all of which have the potential to irrevocably undermine the foundations of higher education?

## Build inclusive excellence

Global partnerships need to develop more contextualised selection mechanisms to break the link between access, social advantage and excellence so that students are not automatically penalised by social background. We need to develop better ways to measure academic potential and robust and sustainable support mechanisms for different types of students once they are admitted. An example of such an initiative is the Future Leader's Initiative, a doctoral programme contributing to the development of a new generation of higher education leaders in South Africa (THE, 2015). Delivered by the University of Bath in partnership with Nelson Mandela University in South Africa, the programme equips participants with advanced research skills and the capacity to develop innovative solutions to issues facing higher education. The programme is supported by the South African Government and applies contextualised meritocratic selection criteria, integrated support mechanisms and a comparative perspective and brings together representatives from all of South Africa's universities.

On a systemic level, governments need to respect and reward the mass institutions that admit students from the most disadvantaged communities, especially in countries which are undergoing transformation. It is important to ask the question why world class universities are not challenged with respect to their poor record in widening access? Given the national resources consumed, should world class universities tear their eyes away from the big prize and be tasked with responsibility for building capacity in higher education systems as a whole? Should we strive for world class systems rather than world class universities?

## Critical learning encompassing global challenges

While skills linked to the labour market are hugely important, we need to develop curricula that gives students the skills and the dispositions for lifelong learning, critical thinking and exposure to shared global challenges through, for example, the analysis of sustainability goals. Many of these principles were imbedded in liberal, elite higher education. The challenge here is how to implement it in a new era where the majority of students live precarious lives, have to pay unaffordable fees for higher education and are physically exhausted and time-poor. How do we reach out to those who simply do not believe in the promises of higher education?

## Research for alternative shared futures

Regarding research, it is important for leaders to develop global platforms to provide models that will predicate new ways of reimagining our shared future. We have to balance the prioritisation of research for profit, where corporations have claims that come before the global good, and reinstate research which includes the important social, political and cultural functions of higher education. Even more fundamental is how we use research to define higher education's contribution to the development of world societies. We are as always in danger of prioritising economic growth as an end in itself. The university's role in human capital development is often emphasised while other important roles are neglected. It is assumed that once growth is assured, other needs will trickle down. However, these dominant ideas about the development of world societies have been severely tested by recent crises and a number of critical accounts have appeared. There are now alternative visions which we can draw on in which economic development is seen as important but in the service of other goals such as security, more secure livelihoods, and political and cultural freedoms (eg Gough and Wood, 2006).

## The university as space for global dialogue

Finally, the renewal of the university as a space for global dialogue is extremely important, particularly in an era where xenophobic organisations are collaborating across borders, where experts are not trusted, and universities themselves face rising forms of populist revolt. While much of this distrust has been manufactured by unscrupulous leaders, it is also true that universities play multiple and contradictory roles in society and that we ourselves have built unscaleable walls around us. We need to develop a two-pronged approach. First, rather than being simply outraged, we need to find answers to the difficult questions that populism raises. We can use our privileged positions to go where others fear to tread and apply academic rigour to throw light on the causes and conditions which give rise to these catastrophes. Second, we need to create a neutral space to support the conversations of conflicting groups about the future and help communities to shape and make choices about possible futures. We need to include those who have been left behind and those who are cynical and disillusioned by developing new forms of *popular*, rather than *populist*, forms of authentic engagement. This will create an enlarged space for democratic deliberation with real potential to respond to global challenges and create a more inclusive world.

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A graduate of the universities of Cambridge and Natal, Professor Naidoo researches transformations in global political economy and higher education with a focus on competition and markets and the contribution of universities to global wellbeing. She has acted as expert advisor to international bodies and research programmes relating to social justice, public good and the academic profession. She was Honorary Secretary of the Society for Research in Higher Education, and sits on committees of the European Foundation for Management Development, and the Research Unit for Higher Education Internationalisation at Nelson Mandela University.

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